Preparing to Teach Acts 9-10

Last session, we ended with Philip leaving his successful citywide crusade in Samaria and traveling toward Gaza via Jerusalem and the desert road. It is important to see the two episodes regarding Paul’s conversion as being sandwiched by other accounts with two beats:

* **Philip in Samaria is balanced by Peter/John in Samaria**
* **Philip 1) evangelizes the eunuch and 2) evangelizes through all the cities to Caesarea**
* **Saul is 1) confronted/converted and 2) discipled**
* **Peter performs miracles in 1) Lydda and 2) Joppa**
* **God gives vision to 1) centurion and then, 2) Peter**
* **Peter preaches in Caesarea and Holy Spirit to Gentiles**

To demonstrate this more visually, after evangelizing and baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip leaves the Gaza area under the power of the Holy Spirit and begins preaching in towns like Azotes (ancient Ashdod) which is named and presumably Joppa which comes under “all the towns” on the coast so that he ends up preaching in Caesarea. I bring this up because Acts 8 ends with Philip in Caesarea while Acts 9 ends with Peter in Joppa leading into Acts 10’s opening in Caesarea. What I want you to see is that Luke masterfully interweaves these accounts of leaders in the early church much like an Asian drama that has many plot threads that you continue to come back to such that they progress just a little bit more (almost a tease) each time.

Luke is portraying the expansion of the gospel by giving us regular cinematic cuts to different characters and locations to help us know that there is a lot going on simultaneously and that they all tie together. Also, I bring this up to show that there is a tie between the beginning of Acts 8 and Acts 9. We last see Saul of Tarsus in Acts 8:1 where he is in agreement with Stephen’s execution. But now, the blood lust isn’t satisfied because, in Acts 9:1: ***1) But Saul, still breathing threatening and slaughter toward the followers of the Lord, came before the High Priest,* [PJT]**

I want to call your attention to two things here. The fact that he is still breathing violent threats against the followers of the Lord means that his fervor, his self-righteous indignation, is boiling within him. One commentator emphasizes that the idea is that he was inhaling this desire for violence which he would then empty out on the church [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 113.] Cicero used the same verb in his famous Catiline Oration, describing Catiline as “…breathing out wickedness, …” [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 227.]

Another commentator noticed that this is the same verb that Euripides used in “The Bacchae” to describe the blood lust of the King of Thebes, Pentheus, who tried to kill Dionysius but was fooled into killing a bull instead [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 71.]

By the way, Luke was probably classically trained enough that he might have been aware of the use of this verb to represent the seething inner poison of someone persecuting a pagan god, so he might have used it to enhance the turnaround in Paul’s life. Here’s the quotation from Euripides’ play as the pagan god, Dionysius, describes the attempt on his life and how he fooled Pentheus: “For at the stall, to which he brought me for a goal, he found a bull, whose legs and hoofs he straightly tied, breathing out fury the while, the sweat trickling from his body, and he biting his lips; …” [Euripides, “The Bacchantes,” (Line 620) Coleridge, Edward P. (trans.) in Adler, Mortimer J. and others (eds.) *Great Books of the Western World: Volume 5: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p. 345. By the way, if Luke was aware he was using this verb, it would not only be a vivid way of describing Saul’s frenzy in persecuting the church, but it would be ironic. After all, Pentheus the attempted persecutor of the pagan god ends up being killed by the followers of the god when they mistake him for a wild animal. Saul ends up being confronted and transformed by the presence of the only true God. I figured I’d share this just to help you show how emotional this term can be, even if Luke wasn’t consciously drawing from the play. Regardless, I think it is safe to say: “The present participle “breathing” (ἐμπνέων) indicates that Saul was involved over an extended period of time in uttering “threats” and “murder” against the believers.” Schnabel, p. 767.]

Second, let me take just a moment here to address the significance of Saul coming before the High Priest. Whether it was Caiphas (prior to AD 35) [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 95; Lightfoot, John B., *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. F. Dove, 1823), p. 133.] or, according to the chronology I offered early in our exploration of Acts [Gloag, Paton J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), pp. 36, 315.] Paul was converted in AD 37 under Theophilus, it still meant that Saul, a Pharisee, was asking permission from a Sadducee [Robertson, p. 113.]. It appears that Saul was so hostile to the early church that he subscribed to the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” philosophy.

Regardless of the identity of the High Priest, a lot of people wonder why the prelate had so much authority. Well, at least from the time of General Pompey and the Roman Civil War with Julius Caesar, Damascus had been part of the Roman province of Syria. Occasionally, the Nabateans would rise up and have to be dispersed as with Pompey’s campaign [Josephus, Flavius, *The Life and Works of Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews: Book XIV, Chapter 3, Paragraph 3* (William Whiston, trans.) \*Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, Co., 1957), p. 411.] According to some scholars, Damascus was under control of the Nabateans under Aretas IV [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 78.]. Some circumstantial evidence such as the absence of Roman coins within the city itself with provenance from AD 34-62 might support that contention [Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 61.] I’m still one to think that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Too often in archaeology, subsequent findings have embarrassed earlier researchers.

Yet, it may well be that the area around Damascus was under control of the Nabateans but the Romans or their surrogates controlled the city itself. After all, Paul’s later escape from the city in a basket in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 suggests that Aretas’ attempt to seize him was after his escape in the basket over the wall and would indicate that Aretas controlled outside the city but not necessarily the city itself [Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 61.]

I detail that material because it is clear that at least by AD 66 and the revolt against Rome, the city was once again a Roman province with a substantial population of Jews [Gloag, p. 316.]. So, consider this: After defeating Pompey at Pharsalus in 48 BC, Julius Caesar became involved in the Egyptian Civil War, favoring Cleopatra over Ptolemy XIII. There, Antipater assisted him and, in gratitude, Caesar gave Hyrcanus II the title of ethnarch and authority of all the Jews throughout the world regarding matters of religion. Even 100 years later, this authority given to the Jewish high priest was not cancelled. [Smith, p. 60.] Some people wonder if the priests at Jerusalem really have such authority. I just want to make it clear that they did. At least 10,000 Jews lived in Damascus in AD 66 because that many had their throats cut during the uprising [Josephus, Flavius, *The Life and Works of Josephus: Wars of the Jews: Book II, Chapter 20, Paragraph 2* (William Whiston, trans.) \*Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, Co., 1957), p. 703.]

***2) he asked for himself, letters to the synagogues in Damascus, in order that if he would find anyone of the Way there, men or women, he might bring them bound helplessly to Jerusalem.* [PJT]**

Again, notice that the wording is that he was asking a favor on behalf of himself. He was taking personal satisfaction in this persecution. We’ll talk about “The Way” in a moment, but I just want to point out something significant here. In the ancient world, the patriarchal world-view was such that if you mentioned the men, you covered the whole population or family. That’s why biblical letters often refer to brothers instead of “brothers and sisters.” Yet, three times in Acts, specifically when talking about Saul’s cruel persecution of the church, the text specifically mentions the women (Acts 8:3; 9:2; and 22:4) to enhance the atrocity [Robertson, p. 114.]

As I said before, Damascus was a significant city with a large Jewish population. It was roughly 150 miles from Jerusalem and a must-stop on the road from Jerusalem to Mesopotamia and on to Persia. According to Josephus, Abraham even stayed there long enough on his trek to the Land of Promise to be King of Damascus. A group of Jews called “The New Covenanters” had fled to Damascus around 130 BC but we cannot prove continuity between those refugees and the believers during this time [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 193, n7.] However, it seems like the similarity between the “New Covenanter” beliefs concerning the Temple and that of those of “the Way” would perform and interesting combination of interests [Smith, p. 61.].

As far as the use of “The Way,” many commentators note that it becomes equivalent to meaning the early church in Acts [Arrington, p. 95; Bruce, p. 194; Foakes-Jackson, pp. 77-78; Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 168.] Its roots can be seen in that Jesus was said, even by His opponents, to have taught the Way of God (Mark 12:14; Matthew 22:16; Luke 20:21) [Foakes-Jackson, p. 77.] In fact, Jesus specifically refers to Himself as “The Way” in John 14:27 [Arrington, p. 95.] And it certainly wasn’t unheard of in Jewish thought because it was the Greek translation of the Hebrew word **חלכה** or “walk,” a term that meant the way you lived your life as though you were “walking” with God and Paul’s defense in Acts 24:14 suggest the “Way” was considered a heretical **חלכה** [Foakes-Jackson, p. 78.]. I also think it would resonate with Isaiah 40:3 and the famous command to prepare the Way of the Lord, a famous Messianic scripture. A Trinity professor agrees with me: “the Way” (ἡ ὁδός), derived from Isa 40:3 and other passages in Isaiah that speak of the “way” on which the Lord would travel when he came to restore Israel, is used in Acts as a designation for the believers in Jesus and their teaching that God was restoring Israel through Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah and exalted Lord and Savior, and that the community of the followers of Jesus is now the renewed people of God. [Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), p. 770.]

As for Acts itself, six times it seems equivalent to the church (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24: 14, 22), albeit it usually refers to the church with hostile intent [Foakes-Jackson, p. 78.] Of course, it is also a specific part of the early church’s teaching ministry as in “way of salvation” (16:17) and “Way of the Lord” (18:25) [Marshall, pp. 168-169.]

But let’s get on with the story. ***3) Then, he was traveling and coming near to Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him,* [PJT]** Light is regularly associated with divine appearances. In the Gnostic (heretical) “Acts of John” we read in verse 97: “And my Lord standing in the midst of the cave and enlightening it, said: John, unto the multitude below in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and reeds, and gall and vinegar is given me to drink. But unto thee I speak, and what I speak hear thou. I put it into thy mind to come up into this mountain, that thou mightest hear those things which it behoveth a disciple to learn from his teacher and a man from his God.” 4 Maccabees 4:10 has: **10**and while Apollonius was going up with his armed forces to seize the money, angels on horseback with lightning flashing from their weapons appeared from heaven, instilling in them great fear and trembling. [NRSV]

I liked this explanation: “First, there was a “light from heaven” (φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) that “flashed around” him; i.e., it was a divine manifestation. Second, the light appeared “suddenly,” without Saul having expected anything unusual to happen. The term underscores God’s sovereignty in this event and links the appearance of the exalted Jesus (v. 5) with the appearances of God (theophanies) in the Old Testament.” [Schnabel, p. 771.] Obviously, we remember the light associated with the angel of the Lord in Luke 2 and the lightning on the throne in both Ezekiel and Revelation.

But, now that we’ve entered the zone of Saul’s Damascus experience, we should probably recognize that Luke shares it three times in the Book of Acts and they are similar, but not the same. They even seem to contradict each other. Let me show you on my slide, although I’ll provide you with a spreadsheet so you can change it to Chinese as a handout for your class if you’d like.

Some think Luke didn’t notice [Smith, p. 61.] I think Conzelmann’s analysis is closer to the truth: “The intention is on the one hand to establish Paul’s companions as witness, but on the other hand to reserve the appearance to Paul alone. (p. 71) The three versions are generally in agreement, but there are differences and even contradictions in details. … The repetition is for stylistic reasons, and the differences can be explained as literary variations…, linked with adaptation of the material for the particular situation.” [Conzelmann, p. 72.]

Also, I believe that there is something of a bibliolatry among those who want all of the accounts in the Bible to read the same. Remember, this is Luke’s account based on what he could gather to emphasize Saul’s dramatic call to eventually become Paul, but the other two accounts are recorded from Paul’s speeches, both in Acts 22 which Luke probably heard and Acts 26 which Luke almost certainly did hear. Even then, Acts 22 was meant as a sermon to the mob and would have different emphases than those in Acts 26 directed at Felix who knew something about both the Jewish faith and those of the Way.

I also think there are those who tend to call this the “conversion” experience of Paul. It may well be, especially if one considers the use of “Lord” to apply to God [Arrington, pp. 96-97], as opposed to the more generic, “sir” [Foakes-Jackson says it is confusing to translate “Lord” in the conversion experience because it either says too little or too much [p. 77.]] It could be argued either way, but if Cornelius can respond “Lord” as recognizing his vision from God (Acts 10:4), why wouldn’t Saul recognize the elements of an appearance of God when he experienced it? [Robertson, p. 117.] But others insist: “The appearance serves first of all not to convert a sinner, but to put down the persecutor.” [Conzelmann, p. 73.]

I also believe the interaction between the Light and Saul is extremely significant. After all, the narrative contains extensive direct speech (146 of 331 words in the Greek text, i.e., 44 percent), mostly of the risen and exalted Jesus (90 words) and Ananias (53 words); Saul’s direct speech is limited to the question, “Who are you, Lord?” (v. 5b), merely three words of Greek text (τίς εἶ, κύριε;). [Schnabel, p. 763.] And part of that is all about Saul finding out what to do in order to be instructed in the Way. I wonder how often the percentage of our speech to God’s communication isn’t more than reversed compared to this example. We need to learn to listen as part of our prayer time/quiet time.

Another theophanic element in the story is the fact that Saul is knocked down. It doesn’t say here that his companions are knocked down even though Acts 26 says that “we all were knocked down.” Why would it only emphasize Saul being knocked down? There are solid biblical and non-biblical traditions of people being knocked down or voluntarily falling down when experiencing God’s power and might. Positively, we see it in Ezekiel 1:28 when the prophet gets his inaugural vision and, negatively, we see it in 2 Maccabees 3:22-36. The apocryphal story is about a military man named Heliodorus who decides to raid the Temple to get God’s gold. An angelic rider (as on the slide) comes up and pummels him nearly to death. But the intercession of the High Priest is heard by God and the same angelic forces come to bring him back to life. Heliodorus is converted and begins proclaiming the glory of God and fighting on God’s side.

So, let’s look at the actual interaction. I’m going to use the list from a recent commentary because I like the way he delineates things.

1. Use of the name Saulos, repeated twice;
2. Present tense of persecution shows Saul is not voluntarily submitting on the ground [Note also that the use of first-person “Me” reflects equivalence between the divine presence and “the Way”—the church, the Lord’s followers (p. 772);
3. Use of Lord in the context of theophany means the question was directed at OT Yahweh as to whether this is Yahweh a la Moses and burning bush or an “angel”;
4. Use of the name “Jesus” underlines the identity of Jesus, who speaks from the reality of God’s heavenly light as Jesus of Nazareth, who had been executed by crucifixion and whose followers Saul is persecuting. Jesus has died, but he is now alive and active as the risen and exalted Son of God (cf. Gal 1:16), intervening in the mission of the church, which Saul seeks to oppress.
5. Jesus tells Saul to go to Damascus and wait for instructions;

[Schnabel, pp. 772-773; Smith, p. 61.]

The double vocative is consistent with other divine calls such as Abraham (Genesis 22:11), Jacob (Genesis 46:2), and Moses (Exodus 3:4) [Willimon, William H*., Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 75.]

As for falling, it is also consistent. Did others fall ? “Their amazedness fixed them, that they could not flee nor stir…” [Lightfoot, p. 132]. That would explain the idea that they just stood there as opposed to Paul’s testimony that everyone fell in Acts 26. But that may be too literal since the phrase could mean that they “stood speechless,” a phrase that could even apply to those on the ground [Bruce, p. 197.]

Obviously, there are some who try to use psychological explanations for what Saul saw and heard. For example, one commentary quotes a French scholar named Ernst Renan: “He sup-poses that Paul, when journeying to Damascus, was in a distracted state of mind; that he was troubled and shaken in his faith; that he was frequently filled with remorse for his conduct; that at times he fancied he saw the sweet face of the Master, who inspired the disciples with so much patience, regarding him with an air of pity and tender re-proach; and that he was much impressed with the accounts that he had heard of the apparitions of Jesus. As he drew near Damascus these feelings overcame him; his nerves were relaxed; a fever or sunstroke suddenly attacked him, deprived him of consciousness, and threw him senseless on the ground.” [cited in Gloag, p. 319; Smith, p . 62, seems sympathetic but admits it is impossible to psychoanalyze the apostle from this distance.]

Some have seen this as an example of epilepsy, but there is no reason to go that route [Bruce, p. 195.] “The event that Luke described in vv. 3–6 was not a subjective, psychological, or mystical experience of Saul; it had an effect on Saul’s travel companions, who stood speechless.” [Schnabel, p. 774.] My former professor and boss believes there was psychological preparation for the experience, but that it was more than a psychological reaction since he had seen some traumatic things like Stephen’s martyrdom and the martyr’s reaction: “It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Paul did have some psychological preparation for the revelation of Christ which God made to him on the Damascus Road.” [Fisher, Fred L., *Paul and His Teachings* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1974.]

“Thus, when Paul was converted, it was not the case of a man without faith finding the way to God, but of one zealous for God, more in earnest than anyone else about his demands and promises. It was a devout man whose way God blocked through the Christ who had died a shameful death on the cross, and on whom he made that light shine of which Paul says elsewhere: ‘For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.’ (2 Cor. 4:6).” [Bornkam, Gunther, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971—original, 1969), p. 23.]

Nevertheless, “Although he was seeking to persecute those who described themselves as “the Way,” he is now unable to find his own way.” [Schnabel, p. 775.]

I also want you to see the importance, as a church of what Jesus responds about what Saul needs to do. He is to be patient until he is discipled. A lot of times new believers think they can just jump into service and they don’t want to listen to anyone else. But before we get there, we have to think of the blindness and the three days fast. We know that something divine is happening whenever we hear the integer 3 and an interval of time that length or a quantity of that amount. Some may think this is merely physical shock from the bright light [Smith, p. 62.], but I think this is an indicator that God is at work.

I don’t, however, follow those who think that this was the occasion when “…he was rapt into the third heaven, and learned the gospel by revelation, ·as 2 Cor. xii, in those three days that he was blind after the sight of this glorious light; and whilst he fasted and prayed; Acts ix. 9.” [Lightfoot, pp. 132-133.] If this was that period when he was granted access to heaven and taught directly there, he wouldn’t have needed the help of Ananias.

Ananias is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name, Hananiah (“God has shown favor” or “God has dealt graciously”) [“Ananias” in Butler, Trent C. (ed.), *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), p. 49.]. Since Paul describes him later as a person with an outstanding reputation and Jesus entrusts him with this commission directly, it is highly likely that Ananias was on Saul’s “hit list.” In fact, Calvin has suggested that Ananias’ hesitation may have been for this reason, “…but this is evidently erroneous, for Paul was represented to him as praying, and blind. Others think that it was a feeling of moral indignation that such a violent persecutor should receive any marks of the divine favour. But the words do not seem to be the expression of reluctance, but of astonishment; as if he had said, “ Is it possible that I should be sent by my Lord to Saul of Tarsus, the violent opponent of the Christians,—Saul, who was coming here with power and authority from the chief priests to persecute the disciples?” [Gloag, pp. 326-327.] Schnabel also thinks Ananias should have felt safe because he was praying [p. 777.] but he also prayed as a Pharisee. So, I don’t think I would have had that much confidence in either the blindness I was supposed to heal or the prayer.

We also should not ignore the reality that “Ananias calls the believers in Jesus “your holy people” (οἱ ἅγιοι σου, v. 13d; see on 5:11), i.e., the people of God. The term is used here not for the Jewish people as a whole but for the limited group of the followers of Jesus. This expression communicates the conviction that “the people of God” are “the people of the Lord Jesus,” with the relationship to the Lord Jesus being decisive. [Schnabel, p. 780.]

Immediately thereafter, Ananias refers to the church as the people who invoke the name of the Lord Jesus in prayer. The implication seems to be that setting Saul free is not the answer to those people’s prayers for safety, but God has a different answer. He responds that Saul/Paul is going to be a “chosen vessel.” That’s important because it is a Hebraism: “That is, a most choice instrument, " a vessel for God's use," saith Rabbi Israel. " [Du Viell, p. 235.] And to top that off, “The Gentiles are mentioned first, because Paul was the apostle of the Gentiles. Ananias could not infer from this that the gospel was to be preached to the Gentiles while they continued uncircumcised; for that was a doctrine which neither Paul nor any of the apostles yet knew.” [Gloag, p. 327.] Compare 2 Tim. ii. 20, 21.

Now, under the banner of “Saul, From Persecuter to Preacher,” note what three things happened to Saul before he was able to begin his ministry. First, he is physically healed when the “scales” fall from his eyes. “The term translated as “scales” (λεπίδες) refers in Greek literature not only to the scales of fish and snakes, but also the coat of an onion, the shell of a nut, the blade of a saw, or snowflakes. The proverbial expression denoting the scale of scab of an injury refers to the eye problem that caused Saul’s blindness.” [Schnabel, p. 785.] Second, he is immersed in water, a baptism that expresses obedience so that the Holy Spirit—there as soon as he received Christ—is operative. Third, he eats and regains his strength.

So, the question is, why do we have this relatively mundane account of Saul’s days in Damascus and apparently preaching there and in the regions round about. For one thing, it demonstrates Saul’s transition from persecuting to being persecuted. For another, it demonstrates a precept stated by John Calvin and which I believe, the two-fold call of ministry: “God calls, but the church must also call.” This discussion continues in Willimon’s commentary as: “In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could remain Paul only in the context of the Christian community.” [p. 82.] He escapes the initial persecution, but gets sent to Tarsus when the believers aren’t quite sure what to do with him.

But if you remember tonight’s opening slide, we placed some importance on the account of Peter. God hasn’t forsaken the original apostles, even though the seven seem to be doing a great job. Peter is still performing miracles which, in turn, cause others to believe. In Acts 9:32-35, he heals a man named Aeneas who has been lame for 8 years. Peter’s words in verse 34 about getting up and making up your bed could also be translated to get up and set the table for yourself [literally, “set the couch” for reclining at the table to eat--Bruce, p. 211.]. You’re probably wondering why I think that is significant. It’s because both Jesus and the apostles often followed their healing commands (and even a resurrection command in Jesus’ case) with a command to get on with their life. I just want to emphasize the fact that God doesn’t heal us or save us to be idle. God has a purpose and we should be seeking that purpose. So, that’s what happens in Lydda.

But if you think healing is significant, wait till he gets to Joppa. There, a woman named Tabitha, also known as Dorcas [Gazelle in both languages], died. Indeed, she was laid out in preparation for burial. We don’t know exactly what Peter thought, but we know that he was reacting to their grief and panic. “In the first century—as today—the majority of the poor and starving were women, especially those women who had no male agencies that might have enabled them to share in the wealth of the patriarchal system.” [Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza as cited in Willimon, p. 85.]

So, Peter sends them out of the room in much the same way that he saw Jesus have the mourners escorted out regarding Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5:41. Interestingly, where Jesus spoke the Aramaic phrase, “Talitha qumi.” (Child, rise up.) Peter says, “Tabitha qumi.” (Tabitha, rise up.) [Bruce, p. 212.] Just one consonant different, but just as effective. It must remind us that we need to be careful to follow the modeling of Jesus in all that we do.

Staying in Joppa, however, isn’t to be Peter’s final experience. Here are the scenes from Chapter 10 as described by Eckhard Schnabel:

1. **The vision of Cornelius (10:1–8)**
2. **The vision of Peter (10:9–16)**
3. **The messengers of Cornelius and Peter (10:17–23b)**
4. **The encounter of Peter and Cornelius (10:23c–33)**
5. **Peter’s sermon (10:34–43)**
6. **The conversion of the first Gentiles (10:44–48)**

The Romans maintained six or seven auxiliary units in Judea, with five of the infantry units and the one cavalry unit recruited locally, primarily from the non-Jewish cities of Sebaste and Caesarea, together about three thousand men. Cornelius’s name, profession, and rank of centurion imply that he was a Roman citizen and a Gentile. [Schnabel, p. 844.] In keeping with my observation that Luke likes to use quick cuts to show us events in parallel (or near-parallel), notice that Cornelius’ vision is balanced by Peter’s vision and vice-versa. It also seems rather delightful that the Gentile centurion should receive the vision in advance of the faithful Jewish apostle’s vision, but it signifies very dramatically that God is the one instigating this mission to the Gentiles and not the apostle. Further, it seems evidence that God’s timing is a lot like what we used to say in the early years of the world-wide web, JIT—“just in time” delivery. Peter gets his vision when he needs it.

Caesarea (Maritima) is not an insignificant place. It had become an important port between Phoenicia (Sidon) and Egypt after Herod expanded it and named it after Augustus. Around A.D. 6, there began to be significant hostilities between Jews and Gentiles [Knight, George W., “Caesarea” in Butler, Trent C. (ed.), *The Holman Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), p. 219.] Herod had a palace there and most of the procurators assigned to Judea had their headquarters there. Indeed, it was at Caesarea that archaeologists first found written evidence of Pontius Pilate’s tenure (confirming the biblical account).

Cornelius, as F. F. Bruce reminds us, was a relatively common name ever since Publius Cornelius Sulla liberated approximately 10,000 slaves in 82 BC (BCE) and enrolled them in the family group (clan) known as *gens Cornelia* [Bruce, p. 214, n 1.]. Luke emphasizes Cornelius’ piety by using a four-fold repetition (vv. 2, 4, 22, and 30) meant to show that though he is an outsider, he is “…one who is at least on the fringe of the community. Furthermore, he is a gentile willing to be instructed and guided.” [Willimon, p. 95.] Yet, even here, it is not Cornelius who takes the initiative but God.

Again, note that his vision of the angel immediately helps Cornelius realize that the vision is of divine origin. This is why Cornelius immediately recognizes this as a message from God and uses the term, “Lord.” Although it is possible that he might just mean “sir,” as some argue regarding Saul in Acts 9, it seems most clear that he associated the angel and the message with God’s divine activity and so, meant “Lord” in the sense of Yahweh, God. One also wonders if any potential unease about sending messengers to Peter would have been ameliorated by the fact that Peter was staying at the house of Simon the Tanner, a person who by virtue of his vocation, would have been ceremonially unclean. Regardless, notice that Cornelius doesn’t waste any time in obeying God. He sends the messengers off right away, reminding me of Abraham leaving the next morning after he has been ordered to sacrifice Isaac.

Also, it might be good at this time to note that without Cornelius’ involvement in sending for Peter (under God’s instructions) it would be unlikely that a Jew would have had the kind of access with influential (and curious) gentiles in Cornelius’ circle if he hadn’t been invited into Cornelius’ home. Indeed, “We need not wonder that Peter needed a special vision before he accepted the visitation of Cornelius to go to a Gentile city like Caesarea, in which the Jews were numerous, but as we learn from Josephus, extremely unpopular, and there openly to associate with Gentiles.” [Foakes-Jackson, p. 89.]

Peter is to receive a vision: “It may indeed, at first sight, appear strange that Peter should require a special revelation to teach him that the gospel should be preached to the Gentiles, especially after the repeated predictions of the call of the Gentiles made in the Old Testament, and the plain statements of the Lord Himself on this subject. But it is to be observed, that the apostles did not doubt that the Gentiles should be received into the Christian church: they received and held it as the commission of their Master, that they should make disciples of all nations. But then they supposed that the conversion of the Gentiles would take place through the medium of Judaism; that in order to be received into the Christian church, they must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.” [Gloag, p. 359.]

So, the key point of Peter’s vision is that the sheet includes both clean and unclean, lawful and unlawful, creatures. The term “all” means that both were represented. That’s why I like the picture that not only has the beef and lamb which are clean, but also cud-chewing camel, the reptiles, and pig. Peter’s response that he hasn’t eaten anything in appropriate is clearly talking about religious purity and ceremony. “The term translated as ‘not allowed’ (ἀθέμιτος) refers to behavior that is forbidden. Most English versions translate as ‘unlawful’; a better rendering is ‘against our laws’ (NLT) because it leaves the question open which specific laws Peter was afraid to violate; helpful is GNB, ‘a Jew is not allowed by his religion.’ The Mosaic law did not forbid Israelites from eating with Gentiles. Jews were only forbidden from eating impure food, which they could do by eating only the vegetables at a meal with Gentiles. Nor did later Jewish tradition uniformly and unanimously stipulate a prohibition concerning Jews visiting Gentiles. But contact with Gentiles was always a potential source of moral defilement for Jews (see on vv. 15–16). A Jewish text exhorts its readers, ‘Keep yourself separate from the nations, and do not eat with them; and do not imitate their rites, nor associate yourself with them’ (Jub. 22:16).”
[Schnabel, p. 864.] So, it is very clear that God is upsetting the paradigm here when Peter is invited to the home of someone presumed unclean.

It's actually surprising to me how quickly Peter puts the vision and his circumstances regarding Cornelius’ invitation together. But as we’ve seen from the beginning of tonight’s session, let’s not forget Luke’s purpose. “Luke was concerned with the mission to the Gentiles and wanted to emphasize two truths: (1) God was responsible for the admission of the Gentiles into the church. Prayers, visions, angels, and the ministry of the Spirit—all emphasize that these events were initiated and empowered by God himself. However, the emphasis on the divine initiative does not deny personal decisions or make Cornelius and Peter robots.” [Arrington, p. 108.] The back and forth between Cornelius’ vision followed by Peter’s vision and Cornelius’ testimony followed by Peter’s testimony such that, as I suggested earlier, “Luke highlights the dual nature of what’s happening.” [Willimon, p. 96.] In other words, God is working on both sides of the wall between Jewish believer and Gentile believer to tear the wall down. That’s why it is so important that the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit with a visual manifestation at the end of the chapter. It is visual evidence that they do not have to be circumcised and become Jewish converts to become Christians, members of the community known as “The Way.”